

Theatrical Representations: Gender Performativity, Fluidity and Nomadic Subjectivity in Phyllis Nagy's *Weldon Rising* and *The Strip*

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Abstract

*This paper seeks to explore the intersections of gender, performance, performativity and nomadic subjectivity by means of examining two characters who appear in drag in Phyllis Nagy's *Weldon Rising* (1992) and *The Strip* (1995). Setting out from Butler's idea of drag as a mechanism that uncovers the falsity of the existence of a "natural" gender identity, I consider its relation to certain Brechtian techniques which have been used in materialist feminist theatre in order to foreground gender construction. Regardless of Butler's intimation that drag is not subversive in a theatrical context I wish to argue for the interventionist potential of drag and gender performativity in the context of performance. I further extend my discussion by suggesting how Rosi Braidotti's theory on "nomadic subjectivity" may complement Butler's notion of fluidity of identity and drag in relation to my two case studies. I am particularly interested in how Braidotti addresses the political implications of fluidity in the context of postmodern society, by underscoring the nomadic subject's need to make connections with his/her context.*

Butler's account of gender identity as constituted through a series of performative acts has been seminal in the development of gender and queer studies since the 1990s: it created a new discourse of identity and representation based on the understanding of gender as "an expression of what one does and not what one is" manifested by means of a reiteration of corporeal acts.¹ This article wishes to discuss the intersection of performativity theory with theatre and to examine issues of gender and representation in two 1990s plays by American lesbian playwright Phyllis Nagy, *Weldon Rising* (1992) and *The Strip* (1995).² I will then seek to promote a dialogue between Butler and Braidotti aiming at problematizing ideas of gender parody, nomadic subjectivity and community.

Performativity and Performance

Borrowing the term "performativity" from theatre studies in order to formulate her gender theory in *Gender Trouble*, Butler drew parallels between the two, arguing that "[t]he acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts".³ She later contested this relation

¹ Moya Lloyd, "Performativity, Parody, Politics", in *Performativity and Belonging*, ed. by Vikki Bell (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, 1999), pp. 195-213 (196).

² Phyllis Nagy is an American lesbian playwright of Hungarian-Sicilian descent who grew up in New York and first emerged on the British stage in 1992 when she came to live permanently in London and work as a playwright. Her work has been analysed in the context of feminist and "in-yer-face" theatre.

³ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", *Theatre Journal*, 40 (1988), pp. 519-31 (521).

arguing that it is a mistake to equate “performativity” with “performance”.⁴ The reason for this was that, according to Butler, performance implies an embodied and voluntary subject, that is, an author (the performer), who precedes the deed of impersonation, whereas with performativity the subject is *produced* by impersonation. In other words, “the appearance of substance”⁵ in theatre undermines this idea of ontological questioning since the audience witnesses the body of the actor who is already gendered and also has agency over the characters s/he portrays. On the contrary, according to Butler’s performativity theory, subjects do not precede the repetition of gestures but are *produced* by such acts/gestures:

performance as bounded act is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists of a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’.⁶

In the wake of Butler’s discussion, theatre theorists unearthed Butler’s shortcomings *vis-à-vis* her theatre metaphor. Echoing scholars such as Elin Diamond, Anthony Kubiak, Erika Fischer-Lichte and others, Christina Wald criticizes Butler for failing to take into account performance’s “double consciousness”, that is, “the split awareness of both the audience and the performers, who simultaneously perceive the performed events and the event of performing”, making the case for the ability of theatrical performance to foster and stimulate reflection regarding performativity.⁷ However, theatre scholarship also concedes the importance of the implications of performativity theory in the context of performance. Most notably, Elin Diamond stipulates that

performance [...] is the site in which performativity materializes in concentrated form, where ‘the concealed or dissimulated conventions’ of which acts are mere repetitions might be investigated and re-imagined”.⁸

It is this possibility of performance to invent strategies for re-imagining and disturbing heteronormative constructions of gender that I seek to assert in the first part of this paper by examining how performativity can function as an instigator of critical reflection regarding gender construction and subversion.

Gender Parody and Brechtian Technique

⁴ Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 95, 234. Also see Preface in *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. xiv.

⁵ Butler, “Performative Acts”, p. 520.

⁶ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 234.

⁷ Christina Wald, *Hysteria, Trauma and Melancholia: Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2007), p. 12. For more analysis regarding the shortcomings of Butler’s idea of intentionality and performance, also see Wald, pp. 16-20. Butler’s failure to perceive performance’s potential to create space for gender subversion is also intimated by Elaine Aston in her article “The ‘Trouble’ with Gender”, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 20 (1999), pp. 24-30 (25).

⁸ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 47.

I have specifically chosen to probe the use of drag in Phyllis Nagy's plays *Weldon Rising* and *The Strip*, concentrating on two eccentric characters: Marcel, a male transvestite, and Ava Coe, an unconventional drag queen who impersonates women by pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman. *Weldon Rising* was the first play that received a formal production after Nagy moved to London and was staged at the Royal Court Upstairs in 1992. Set in New York's meat-packing district, the play narrates the story of an alienated community of gay neighbours who witness a queer-bashing incident in their neighbourhood: Jimmy, Weldon's partner, is murdered by a young homophobe. Despite witnessing the act, the characters of Marcel, Tilly, Jaye and Weldon are afraid to take responsibility for their inactivity. When their guilt is transformed into a fierce heatwave, the characters are impelled to relinquish their passivity and alienation and to form connections with each other. *The Strip* was staged at the Royal Court Downstairs in 1995 and directed by Steven Pimlott. It has been described as a "thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle of a Jackson Pollock painting"⁹ which underscores its surreal and complex plot involving a large cast, rendering a plot summary difficult. The audience follows five American and five English characters whose travelling encounters shift the action from the United States to England and back again as they find themselves in Las Vegas. Ava Coe travels from New York to Las Vegas wishing to make a successful career as an impersonator in a Vegas club called Tumbleweed Junction.

Butler's understanding of drag as parodying the notion of an abiding self and of a natural sex, constitutes an ideal locus for the exploration of the characters of Marcel and Ava; their portrayal aptly blurs the boundaries between real/artifice, true/false, male/female, initiating a meta-game of signification which unveils the mechanisms of gender representation and introduces the idea of gender as a simulacrum that lacks originality. The performance of gender through a series of repeated corporeal acts resonates with the constructivist idea that sex and gender are discursively constructed, a claim that deprives them of an internal essence.¹⁰ One of the basic contributions of constructivism has been to expose how the body is produced within a web of taxonomical structures and binary logic. The categories man, woman, heterosexual, homosexual are nominal and ideological creations without any internal essence, yet reified as natural. By inscribing a discrete identity upon the female body that would most importantly serve a reproductive function, such norms/ideology produce intelligible and recognizably feminine bodies based on the "heterosexual contract" and structures of kinship.¹¹ A way of resisting that inscription, Butler asserts, is the parody of such structures by means of the portrayal of fluid identities, bodies

⁹ Phyllis Nagy, *Plays 1* (London: Methuen, 1998), p. 246.

¹⁰ However, it must be noted that Butler has refuted the feminist distinction between sex and gender.

¹¹ Butler is drawing from different disciplines such as structural anthropology, sociology and Lévi-Strauss, poststructuralism and Michel Foucault among others in order to prove how heteronormativity ensures the reproduction of a heterosexual kinship system. See "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", pp. 524-5. Much has been written about the mechanisms that impose disciplinary practices upon the body so that it serves a reproductive and thus useful social function; most notably Michel Foucault has termed this mechanism "bio-power" in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), pp. 140-45.

that are not circumscribed by a hegemonic duality of sex but that fluctuate among multiple gender identities, undermining the power of essentialist discourses. Drag's gender parody intimates a perpetual gender displacement

constitut[ing] a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization, and [...] depriv[ing] hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to essentialist accounts of gender identity.¹²

This constructivist view has also been endorsed by materialist feminist theatre whose scope is to dismantle the representational apparatus, unveiling the patriarchal ideology embedded in the representation of women. For that purpose, materialist feminist playwrights and practitioners have utilized Brechtian techniques such as the famous "alienation effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt*) whose main purpose is to dissuade the spectator from identifying with the characters onstage.¹³ By creating a critical distance between the character and the spectator, the "A-effect" exhibits the ideology which is embedded in the social structure in a habitual form, thereby defamiliarising the spectator.¹⁴ Although Nagy belongs to a generation of female playwrights who renounce any strong affiliation and adherence to labels such as feminism, she often utilizes techniques similar to materialist feminist theatre in order to criticize systems of representation.

Marcel and Ava constitute examples of parodic identities that play with the arbitrariness of the sex/gender system of signification through drag. Butler suggests that drag is a technique which

fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity¹⁵

thus undermining the idea of an original gender identity. However, she has contested the level of drag's subversiveness on a theatre stage, arguing that theatrical conventions may operate as a safety net for the transvestite character, since they disarm audience preconceptions and persuade audiences that what they witness onstage is separate from reality. By contrast, Butler suggests,

gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions [...]. On the street or in the bus, the [performative] act becomes dangerous.¹⁶

¹² Butler, "Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory and Psychoanalytic Discourse", in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Linda Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 324-40 (338).

¹³ Brechtian alienation effect is rooted in the Russian Formalist technique of "defamiliarisation" deployed by Victor Shklovsky in his essay "Art as Technique" (1917).

¹⁴ See *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. by John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang/London: Methuen, 1964). On the relation of materialist feminist theatre to Brechtian techniques see Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), pp. 99-117; Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 92-106; Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 174.

¹⁶ Butler, "Performative Acts", p. 527. This is based on Butler's suggestion of the social necessity to perform discrete genders which are "part of what 'humanizes' individuals within

However, this assertion fails to consider the ideological implications that a representation of a drag queen on stage may invoke for the audience. Even if theatrical conventions minimise the challenge of real existence, on the other hand, it is exactly this “double consciousness” – that is, the awareness of such norms – which enables the spectator to see gender as a representation and as an instance of a series of performative acts. As Wald maintains,

[p]rotected by theatrical conventions, the theatre opens up a space for cultural observation and contemplation that everyday performances can hardly achieve.¹⁷

Analysing drag on stage as an instance of the “A-effect” foregrounds the critical distance that enables the audience to witness the parody of gender roles and gender constraints imposed upon the body. Thus, drag on stage operates as a means of denaturalizing gender ideology, encouraging the spectator to see gender anew, *as a representation*, and thereby disturbing it from within.

In *Weldon Rising*, the spectator witnesses Marcel dressed in “a plastic dress and platform shoes,” meticulously washing a pair of pantyhose. By (re)presenting a male body dressed in female clothes and performing as a female, Nagy stresses the mimetic nature of gender that is realised through a stylized repetition of performative acts. This technique acquires even more power since in her stage directions, Nagy notes that Marcel is very much a man, “not at all effeminate or mincing”.¹⁸ Hence the actor’s anatomy enables the spectator to witness the difference between the natural and the constructed; or to put it more succinctly, “the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed”.¹⁹

However, Marcel’s portrayal still maintains the idea of a natural body which may impose a limitation on the extent of gender fluidity. Ava’s character in *The Strip* offers an even more complicated reading by contesting the differentiation between the natural and the constructed and foregrounding both sex and gender as constructed. Critic Michael Coveney describes Ava as “a big-busted butch amalgam of Madonna and Judy Garland”,²⁰ while in the beginning of the play Ava confesses:

AVA: I don’t really look like a girl. I’m too ... something. I got big tits but they look fake, or so this guy from Hoboken told me. I went to beauty school with this drag queen Tina, and I think I kind of look like her [...].²¹

When Ava impersonates female performers such as Madonna, she contests the naturalness of the sex/gender system ingrained in the social apparatus;

contemporary culture” and the punitive consequences faced by bodies who fail to perform their gender right. See “Performative Acts”, p. 522.

¹⁷ Wald, p. 22.

¹⁸ Phyllis Nagy, *Plays 1* (London: Methuen, 1998), p. 3. In the Royal Court production, actor Andrew Woodall, who played Marcel, was bare-chested while washing his pantyhose, foregrounding this discrepancy between the anatomy of the male actor’s body and his gender performance.

¹⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 175.

²⁰ Nagy, *Plays 1*, p. xv.

²¹ Nagy, *Plays 1*, p. 185.

she is utilizing her body's "naturally fake" appearance, that is, the artificiality of her body pretending to be a man dressed as a woman. According to Aston's observation,

the effect of Ava's female impersonation [...] is to denaturalize the signs of femininity; to question the representational frame to which the real body is supposed to bear likeness.²²

In order to elaborate on her intentions when she was creating Ava, Nagy commented that

women clearly have been reduced to becoming impersonations of themselves in order to get anything done. [...] Ava is my commentary on modern womanhood gone berserk.²³

Hence, Ava's meta-performance manages to further displace the notion of a natural femininity and to reveal "that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is [...] an imitation without an origin".²⁴ This idea leads to the conclusion that in both *Weldon Rising* and *The Strip*, drag acts as a commentary on femininity which can be perceived as being "always drag, the poor copy, [...] because masculinity is the norm and the original".²⁵ In the case of Marcel, the masculine body of the performer still upholds the idea of originality whereas in *The Strip*, the female body appears to be a poor copy without an original. This absence of originality in performing femininity echoes Baudrillard's ideas on hyperreality and simulation. "Simulation", Baudrillard purports, "threatens the difference between the 'true' and 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary'",²⁶ adding to Butler's claims of the non-existence of an original gender identity, and its construction by contemporary culture. What further adds to the postmodern predicament of the loss of origin and truth is the characters' envelopment in hyperreal, non-naturalistic spaces. The order of the simulacra is apparent by the use of an enormous map of the meat-packing district in *Weldon Rising*, which covers the stage, whereas in *The Strip*, the set is overwhelmed by a three-dimensional reproduction of the Sphinx and pyramid representing the exterior of the Luxor hotel in Las Vegas. While the characters travel across the US or England to end up in Las Vegas, Nagy's stage directions stipulate that the Sphinx and the pyramid "never leave the stage"²⁷, indicating the characters' entrapment in a simulated, artificial setting.

The reception of gender parody by the audience is equally important in terms of its efficacy; on the one hand it can be alienating and subversive but it also has the potential to create empathy and draw connections between the character and the audience. While the idea that two characters in drag may

²² Elaine Aston, *Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights 1990-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 120.

²³ Phyllis Nagy, Interview, in *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*, ed. by Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge (London: Methuen, 1997), pp.19-28 (24).

²⁴ Judith Butler, "Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory", p. 338.

²⁵ Geraldine Harris, *Staging Femininities: Performance and Performativity* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 59.

²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.3.

²⁷ Nagy, *Plays 1*, p. 182.

attract empathy from the audience seems to collide with Brechtian techniques of alienation, I would suggest that it proves to be a productive tension in the context of the two case studies in question.²⁸ This connection and empathy is firstly facilitated by means of the comic devices that permeate Nagy's theatre. Nagy herself believes that "if you can make people laugh, they will listen to almost anything you have to say".²⁹ Marcel is an entertaining and crucial character in the play, generating laughter when trying to wash her pantyhose or with sarcastic lines such as "I didn't think I'd live to see the day when a lesbian became my pimp".³⁰ Ava's self-parody and clumsiness onstage also produces laughter and stresses her human quality, thus enabling the audience to empathize with her effort to make a successful career as a female impersonator. In *Weldon Rising*, Nagy utilizes a technique that ingeniously encapsulates the distinction between character and actor but also hints at the identification of the audience in the auditorium with Marcel. Throughout most of the play, Marcel speaks in the third person when referring to herself, a device which may be read as an alienation technique, as a foregrounding of the split between the performed character and the embodied actor. Nevertheless, this device also functions as a metaphor of the politics of spectatorship. Marcel is speaking in the third person for as long as she maintains an alienated position from her community. She witnesses a murder but chooses to remain tacit and refuses to act, in effect implicating the audience as passive onlookers who witness the act of murder but who remain inactive. Once she acknowledges her own complicity and confesses her individual guilt she starts articulating the 'I', indicating her transformation to an active subject and thus hinting at the need for the audience also to relinquish their passivity and alienation.

Thinking about Performativity and Nomadic Subjectivity

Although some forms of drag can be considered as strategies that disrupt the fixity of the heterosexual matrix, postmodern critics have questioned the extent of the possibilities for agency and political intervention afforded by fluid identities. Jean Baudrillard has warned about the disappearance of the political due to "the viral loss of determinacy", claiming that every cultural domain's subjection to the law of "the confusion of categories" and its infusion by sex, politics and aesthetics has created a critical impasse for resistance and liberation.³¹ In addition, Butler's theory on gender performativity as it has been developed in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* has been criticized by many feminist theorists for precluding a full exploration of how agency can

²⁸ What is more, current re-readings of Brecht have unearthed more multi-layered approaches. Manfred Wekwerth has pointed out the use of empathy and alienation in Brecht's work in his article "Questions Concerning Brecht" in *Reinterpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film*, Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, eds. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 19-37 (34-7).

²⁹ Nagy, Interview, p. 24.

³⁰ Nagy, *Plays 1*, p. 41.

³¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. by James Benedict (London and New York: Verso, 1993), pp. 7-9.

be attained.³² Foucauldian feminist critic Lois McNay discusses these limitations, alluding to Foucault's ambiguous model of power and resistance that presents agency in a rather abstract way.³³ While the subject Butler describes is bound to be enclosed in a system that circumscribes his/her identity, she nevertheless points at the possibility of disruption from within, viewing gender as a locus of productive activity.³⁴ This however presupposes the existence of a critical subject which would pursue change by resisting and destabilising the heterosexual matrix by means of the fluidity of identity. As I have already argued, the use of drag in *Weldon Rising* and *The Strip* demystifies the naturalization of gender ingrained in heteronormativity by foregrounding its constructedness. Ava's meta-performance in *The Strip* proves that her playing with gender performativity is a *voluntary* act. Towards the end of the play, Ava begins her show in front of her Las Vegas audience by confessing: "I'm just some chick who pretends to be a chick so people will look at me in a different light."³⁵ Thus, Ava's wish to confuse gender categories through her performativity fulfils the scope of Butler's project in that she stands for a subject in-between, who does not have a stable gender identity but seeks to explore it through drag. Until the end of *The Strip* Ava's gender cannot be exemplified in binary terms but remains ambiguous; while she is kissed by Kate Buck, the lesbian journalist in the play, it remains open whether she decides to adopt a lesbian identity or not. Although Marcel's gender performativity and her choice to be called a "she", operates within a binary framework, and thus may not appear as an instance of a fluid identity per se, it demonstrates how she occupies a complex and contested positioning within the sociocultural matrix. The representations of Marcel and Ava foreground a wish to intervene in others' perception of their identity.

Rosi Braidotti suggests that "parody can be politically empowering on the condition of being sustained by a critical consciousness that aims at engendering transformations and changes"³⁶, thus acquiescing with the need for a critical subject that Butler's theory implies. Braidotti goes on to argue that

what is political is precisely this awareness of the fractured, intrinsically power-based constitution of the subject and the active quest for possibilities of resistance to hegemonic formations.³⁷

However, I would make a case for the importance of examining the conditions of the subject's gender resistance and transformation by probing his/her relations with his/her community. Critical gender parody, although disturbing, still runs the risk of creating "an exilic subject", one who acts in isolation, thus minimising the effect of his/her intervention.

³² See Seyla Benhabib, "Subjectivity, Historiography and Politics", and Nancy Fraser, "False Antitheses" in Seyla Benhabib et al. eds., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp.107-126; 59-74.

³³ Lois McNay, "Subject, Psyche and Agency", in *Performativity and Belonging*, ed. by Vikki Bell (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, 1999), pp. 175-93 (177-8).

³⁴ Claire Colebrook, *Gender* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2004), p. 112, and Moya Lloyd, "Performativity, Parody, Politics", p. 200.

³⁵ Nagy, *Plays 1*, p. 259.

³⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 7.

³⁷ Braidotti, p. 35.

Braidotti offers her own model of postmodern political agency for fluid subjects who resist hegemonic structures under the figuration of the “nomadic subject”:

The nomadic subject is a myth, that is to say a political fiction, that allows me to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges. [...] The nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity.³⁸

Braidotti’s theory is analogous to Butler’s in that they both dismantle dominant representations and explore the potential of resistance through fluidity. However, Braidotti argues that this resistance needs to be articulated in tandem with the subject’s critical position within his/her own community which moves away from the notion of the exilic subject that I referred to above. Instead, “nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections”.³⁹

In the light of Braidotti’s figuration of the nomadic subject, I would argue that the portrayal of Marcel and Ava extends the discussion of drag as an instance of nomadic subjectivity, as a metaphor for a subject-in-process embodying fluidity and difference. However, it also points to new directions in viewing their resistance as a political act in the context of their community. In other words, these two characters not only illustrate gender construction but also pose the urgent question of gender resistance within the context of a postmodern society which has lost the sense of the political as Baudrillard has suggested.

In the beginning of *Weldon Rising*, the audience witnesses Marcel’s choice to disturb the heterosexual matrix by choosing to appear in drag and refer to himself as a “she”. Marcel’s nomadism is illustrated by the fact that her space is the street; she does not have a permanent residence and calls herself “a citizen of the universe”. However, her sense of nomadic identity does not fulfill the scope of Braidotti’s project, since Marcel refuses to form any meaningful connections but prefers to be isolated. She is very possessive of her space and shows her aversion to anybody who is not a potential client. Nevertheless, after taking responsibility for her complicity and establishing connections with her community, Marcel no longer relies on pronouns based on binaries; she uses the ‘I’ in order to transform into a nomadic traveller, which is underscored by her celebratory exit in ‘an explosion of hot white light’.⁴⁰

The relation of the nomad with his/her community is also negotiated in *The Strip* where Nagy addresses an even more intricate question: is there any leeway for creating “real” connections within a context that dissimulates reality, or are we bound to be immersed in confusion and alienation from each other? While the question remains unanswered, the play’s ending gestures towards the possibility of imagining a sense of community among the characters. Nagy dramatises the level of their transformation by means of

³⁸ Braidotti, pp. 4, 22.

³⁹ Braidotti, p. 35.

⁴⁰ Nagy, *Plays 1*, p. 41.

their travel encounters, and in the last scene brings them into the same space. In a similar way, while Ava's journey is initially fuelled by her interest in her career as an impersonator, when she arrives at her ultimate destination she discloses in public the knowledge she acquired by means of the relations she formed.

Conclusion

The above analysis has attempted to expose the intricacy of gender performativity in the context of theatre and problematize how this resistance does not necessarily imply an exilic notion of subjectivity that is isolated from its community. The influence of Butler's theory on gender performativity is of particular importance in the context of theatre studies, where ideas of representation and physicality have an immediate effect on the community of spectators. However, I think that Braidotti's nomadic subject manages to maintain a balance between difference, fluidity and communal belonging and opens up possibilities of a (feminist) "we". As Nagy has pointed out: "political theatre always offers the opposite of stasis [...] and the possibility for change."⁴¹ Her portrayal of Marcel and Ava succeeds in fulfilling that promise, albeit to differing degrees, by "blurring boundaries without burning bridges",⁴² opening up a performative and nomadic exploration of identity and community.

⁴¹ Rachel McGill, "Feature: An Expatriate Voice", *Plays International* 14 (1999): pp. 10-11, 29, 45.

⁴² Braidotti, p. 4.

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